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Approaches to socio-cultural barriers to information seeking

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Abstract

Drawing on conceptual analysis, the study elaborates the picture of socio-cultural barriers to information seeking. The analysis focuses on the features of such barriers and their impact on information seeking in diverse contexts. A typology identifying six main types of socio-cultural barriers was developed: barriers due to language problems, barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo, small-world related barriers, institutional barriers, organizational barriers, and barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital. Socio-cultural barriers are man-made constructs originating from social norms and cultural values. The barriers have mainly an adverse impact on information seeking by restricting access to information sources and giving rise to negative emotions.

1. Introduction

In the domain of information behavior research, key concepts like information need, information sharing, and information use are plagued by vagueness and multiple meanings (Fleming-May, 2014). Another example of a poorly defined concept in this domain is barriers to information seeking, the main focus of the present study.

To define the scope of the investigation, the specification of the main domains of information behavior originally proposed by Wilson (2000) and further elaborated by Jansen and Rieh (2010, p. 1518) appeared to be particularly useful. At the highest level of generality, human information behavior is the broadest domain, addressing all aspects of human information interactions with various forms of information. At a middle level, a subset is information-seeking behavior, which encompasses the range of information seeking employed in discovering and accessing information resources (both humans and systems) in response to goals and intentions. Finally, at the micro level, information searching behavior is a subset of information seeking, referring to the actions involved in interacting with an information search system, including information retrieval (IR). To strengthen the focus of the study, the present investigation concentrates on the domain of information seeking. As the boundary between the domains of information seeking and information searching has been blurred due to the increasing popularity of networked sources, the present study also looks at relevant investigations characterizing barriers to information searching. For the sake of simplicity, however, information searching is not discussed as a separate category; issues related to barriers to information searching are reviewed under the broader concept of information seeking. However, to sharpen the focus, barriers specifically related to IR were excluded (e.g., Borgman, 1996; Kumpulainen & Järvelin, 2012).

In general, barriers can be understood as physical or immaterial “obstacles hindering, delaying or preventing access to information” (Swigon, 2011a, p. 475). The barriers can be internal or external to information seekers. Internal barriers arise from inside of an individual, and they can be divided into two main categories: affective and cognitive. Affective barriers typically stem from negative emotions such as fear of facing unpleasant facts while seeking health information. For example, cancer patients tend to prefer self-protection and guard themselves from aversive

information by avoiding all information sources or venture in information seeking only to obtain positive information (but still avoid negative information). Thus, they prefer the strategy of “not knowing is better” (Lambert, Loiselle, & Macdonald, 2009, pp. 30-31). Examples of cognitive barriers include unawareness of relevant information sources and poor search skills. For instance, among persons 85 years and older, the ability to formulate information needs and seek information is often inhibited by declining cognition and loss of plasticity (Asla, 2013, p. 196). In contrast, external barriers originate outside an individual and are thus imposed. Barriers of this type may be spatial (e.g., long distance to a library), temporal (e.g., an absolute deadline limiting the time available for information seeking), or socio-cultural (e.g., bureaucratic inertia).

2. Problem statement

The present investigation contributes to basic research on information behavior by reviewing external barriers to information seeking concentrating specifically on one main type of external constraint, i.e., socio-cultural barriers. This focus was chosen for two reasons. First, although researchers have characterized such barriers since the 1970s, the findings have remained fragmentary and mainly descriptive. Thus, there is a need to elaborate the existing knowledge about socio-cultural barriers by putting the pieces together at a higher level of generality. Second, the study of such barriers also has practical implications for the development of library and information services because the findings deepen our understanding of why and how cultural values and social norms constrain people's access to information.

In general, socio-cultural factors can be defined as a set of values, norms, roles, language, symbols, customs, moral and religious beliefs, taboos, perceptions, and preferences acquired by people as members of society (Giddens, 2006, pp. 1034-1036; Prinz, 2011). Such factors have double roles in that they both facilitate and constrain human action. In the former role, socio-cultural factors enable people to interact and live together. In the latter role, they appear as barriers delimiting the range of choices available to people at the individual and community levels.

To elaborate the existing knowledge about socio-cultural barriers, this research addresses two questions:

- RQ1: How have researchers conceptualized the features of socio-cultural barriers to information seeking?
- RQ2: In which ways have researchers characterized the impact of such barriers on information seeking?

3. Procedures

To investigate the research questions, a considerable number of studies, both conceptual and empirical investigations, were examined by means of conceptual analysis. Research material was identified by searching databases such as LISA and EBSCO. Keywords used in the literature search included barrier, constraint, limit, obstacle, social, cultural, information seeking, and information searching. In addition, the review articles on information needs, seeking, and use published in the volumes of the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* were scrutinized. The search yielded about 90 potentially relevant documents published since the 1970s. Of these, 55 articles, conference papers, and books explicitly discussing the socio-cultural barriers to information seeking were selected for in-depth analysis. This sample appeared to be sufficient for the purposes of conceptual analysis, because the review of additional documents did not add nuance to the results, and the categories became saturated enough (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 343). The studies chosen for analysis ranged from general level conceptualizations (e.g., Wilson, 1981) to empirical investigations characterizing socio-cultural barriers in diverse contexts such as work task performance (e.g., Reddy & Spence, 2008) and health (e.g., Yi, Stvilia, & Mon, 2012). The majority

of these investigations have been published in the forums of library and information science, but the research material also includes articles from other fields, such as health communication, nursing science, and youth studies.

The documents chosen for the analysis were scrutinized by means of conceptual analysis. Following Furner (2004), this method can be defined as an approach that treats concepts like socio-cultural barrier or sub-concepts such as institutional barrier as classes of objects, events, properties, or relationships. It involves defining the meaning of a given concept by identifying and specifying the contexts in which any entity or phenomenon is classified under the concept in question. More specifically, the documents were analyzed by devoting attention to how researchers have characterized

- the features of socio-cultural barriers as factors affecting the ways in which people access sources of information (for example, the attributes used to qualify institutional barriers)
- the ways in which socio-cultural barriers have an impact on information seeking (for example, the ways in which the paucity of social capital limits access to human sources).

Relevant text portions (paragraphs and sentences) focusing on the above issues were first identified. This material was then read several times in order to identify individual characterizations or definitions of the main concept, that is, socio-cultural barriers. The texts chosen for analysis were then subjected to open coding to identify the sub-concepts describing the features of socio-cultural barriers. The codes were developed iteratively and inductively from a close reading of the research material. It appeared that in most studies the barriers were approached descriptively by characterizing the ways in which they hamper information seeking. The focus was thus placed on the features of socio-cultural constraints. Sometimes, researchers also referred to antecedents of barriers, e.g., restrictive norms characteristic of small-world communities (e.g., Chatman, 1992). Unfortunately, in these studies, the characterizations of the antecedents and features of barriers were lumped together so that it was not possible to differentiate them reliably. Therefore, these factors will be discussed together under the category of features. The conceptual analysis was based on the identification of similarities and differences between various characterizations of sub-concepts describing the features of barriers. Finally, the identified sub-concepts were named according to the data they contained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This resulted in the identification of six types of socio-cultural barriers. The analysis was continued by identifying ways in which the socio-cultural barriers of diverse types have an impact on information seeking.

The conceptual analysis was rendered more difficult due to the fact that researchers use varying terminology while referring to factors hampering information seeking. For example, Shenton (2007) prefers the term “information seeking problem” while referring to such factors. However, it appeared that information seeking problem is a term closely related to the construct of barrier because the former indicates how diverse factors inhibit an optimal process of information seeking. Therefore, information seeking problem was understood as synonymous with barrier. Some researchers (e.g., Attfield & Dowell, 2003) prefer the term “constraint.” In the present study, the terms barrier and constraint are used synonymously, because the boundary between them tends to be elusive and they often refer to the same factors hampering information seeking in some way. Finally, Swigon (2011b, p. 366) introduces the term “information limits,” defined as “obstacles hindering, delaying or preventing access to information, i.e. information seeking, searching and using.” Again, on similar grounds, this term was understood as synonymous with barrier to information seeking.

To strengthen the focus of the study, a few barriers of particular kind were excluded from the analysis because of the paucity of relevant investigations. These barriers include, for example, racial discrimination (e.g., Warren, Kvasny, Burgess, Ahluwalia, & Okuyemi, 2010), and barriers arising from undocumented immigration (e.g., Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010, p. 517). Given the small number of such studies, this limitation does not endanger the validity of research findings.

Finally, to sharpen the focus of the study, no attempt was made to examine the barriers specific to information use, that is, factors hampering the interpretation of information content available in sources obtained at hand (for these issues, see, for example, Houston & Westbrook, 2013).

4. Findings

The questions dealing with socio-cultural barriers are not new, and there are a number of investigations characterizing their features in diverse contexts of information seeking. Early contributions include Tom Wilson's (1981) framework identifying inter-personal constraints of information seeking. Since the 1990s, the picture of socio-cultural barriers has been enriched by new features such as restrictive social norms (Chatman, 1992) and lack of social capital (C. A. Johnson, 2007). Socio-cultural barriers to information seeking have been characterized in diverse contexts, for example, organizational decision making (J. D. Johnson, 1996, pp. 69-98), and they have been examined among various groups of people, for example, abused women (Harris & Dewdney, 1994) and international students (Mehra & Bilal, 2007).

In general, researchers have approached socio-cultural barriers as human-made constructs mainly stemming from social norms and normative expectations, as well as cultural values. Barriers of these kinds can appear in societal, institutional, and organizational contexts, but they may also be specific to local communities or small groups. Social norms are exogenous factors internalized by the members of a community during the socialization process, and they function as standards defining the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Norms can play a crucial role in individual choice because they serve as criteria for selecting among alternatives (Bicchieri, 2006; Chatman, 2000, p. 13). Therefore, social norms and normative expectations can form invisible barriers to information seeking. Such norms and expectations suggest which information sources or source types should be ignored or avoided because they are not valued by the community members. Furthermore, socio-cultural barriers may originate from economic factors. Since economic resources are not distributed equally across the population, disadvantaged people are more likely to face economic barriers to information seeking. Although economic barriers could be examined as a separate category, for the sake of simplicity, they will be discussed under the umbrella of socio-cultural barriers because economy is not an area isolated from society and culture.

4.1. Barriers due to language problems

Socio-cultural barriers of this type appear as insufficient proficiency in the dominant language in a country, resulting in the lack of common vocabulary. Most studies reviewing such barriers concentrate on difficulties faced by ethnic and cultural minorities, for example, immigrants (Caidi et al., 2010). A study examining information-seeking behavior among Hispanic migrant farm workers exemplifies well the features of barriers of this kind (Fisher, Marcoux, Miller, Sánchez, & Ramirez Cunningham, 2004). The lack of a common language was a major barrier for immigrant families, because most important documents are written in English and because the cost of hiring an interpreter often outweighs the benefits of their information-seeking behavior (Fisher et al., 2004). Barriers due to language problems were also revealed in Jeong's (2004) study focusing on information seeking among Korean graduate students in the United States. Whether on or off campus, they had little interaction with Americans because of their weak conversation skills. Similarly, Mehra and Bilal (2007) found that international students' limited vocabulary in the English language considerably hampered information seeking. This barrier was reflected, for example, in the hesitancy and fear to speak with the librarian due to cultural factors.

More recently, Kim and Yoon (2012) investigated the use of an online forum for health information by Korean women in the United States. Due to insufficient proficiency in English, they felt frustrated by not being able to ask doctors' questions or to understand what doctors said. A

study conducted by Yi et al. (2012) confirmed the above findings. Language problems represented the biggest obstacle for ethnic minorities among the Asian residents. When Korean members of the community could not get satisfactory information because of a language barrier, they would assign more weight to other Koreans' experiences than any other indicators. Therefore, barriers due to language problems had a negative impact on information seeking in that they excluded people from novel information sources and compelled them to resort to customary sources available within their linguistic enclave. As shown by Jeong (2004), dependence on ethnolinguistic gatekeepers can limit information that is made available to immigrants, thus resulting in poor information choices. Similar barriers may be faced if immigrant children act as information mediators for their families. Children may acculturate and develop English language skills more quickly than their parents (Chu, 1999). However, as children tend to have less sophisticated information seeking skills than adults, they may fail to provide accurate information for family use.

4.2. Barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo

Barriers of this type can concern people across social strata, independent of their linguistic group. Common to barriers of this kind are the sense of being an outsider, lack of social support, and mistrust of others. People being classified this way carry social stigma. It is a label that associates a person with a set of unwanted characteristics that form a stereotype. A person may be stigmatized on the basis of deviations in personal traits, for example, excessive obesity. In addition, social stigma can result from one's low social status, for example, refugee (Caidi et al., 2010). Cultural taboo can be referred to as strong prohibitions relating to an area of human activity or custom that is sacred or forbidden based on moral judgment and religious beliefs.

So far, barriers of this type have primarily been conceptualized in studies focusing on health information seeking. Veinot (2009) examined barriers faced by a stigmatized group, in this case individuals with HIV/AIDS. The barriers manifested themselves in that the participants disclosed their problems selectively to others, avoided the topic in conversation, and tried to seek information without disclosing their HIV status. Oyserman, Fryberg, and Yoder (2007) found that when individuals from stigmatized groups are placed in medical encounters where they perceive that they are denied access to information because of negative social stereotypes, this may adversely impact their confidence to obtain the information they need, and reduce engagement with seeking health information. Further examples of the barriers related to social stigma can be found in studies reviewing information behavior of people belonging to sexual minorities, for example, gay males. Hamer (2003, p. 81) showed that among these people the fear of being judged was reflected in the concealment of information-seeking behavior: hiding gay print materials, clearing their family computer's memory so their Internet use could not be tracked, and not disclosing their whereabouts when going to gay enclaves.

Barriers related to cultural taboo can restrict information seeking from human sources in particular. Sligo and Jameson (2000,) explored the ways in which Pacific Islanders in a New Zealand healthcare setting acquired information about cervical screening. The findings indicate that for most participants this was a taboo area, hardly to be discussed even with one's closest friends. Talking about the process of cervical screening was constrained by cultural and religious beliefs, as well as social norms. More recently, Watkins Davis, Diaz-Mendez, and Talosig Garcia (2009, p. 169) examined barriers to seeking cancer information among Spanish-speaking cancer survivors. The findings indicate that talking about cancer was a cultural taboo. Common cultural beliefs made it difficult to discuss the cancer with others, including leaving everything up to God, feeling that cancer does not apply to them, and feeling ashamed to get a physical exam. Barriers of this type were also identified by Price and Dalglish (2013) in a study among indigenous Australian adolescents seeking help regarding mental health problems. One of the barriers appeared to be fear

of being punished by their parents because mental illness is a taboo; being diagnosed as mentally ill would shame one's family in the eyes of the local community.

4.3. Small-world related barriers

Socio-cultural barriers can also appear at the level of local communities whose members orient their behavior according to community-specific norms and cultural values. Drawing on the ideas of Chatman (1991, 1996, 1999), such constraints are referred to as small-world related barriers. Different from constraints related to social stigma and cultural taboo, small-world related barriers are confined to certain local communities that are relatively closed to outsiders. Retirement houses (Chatman, 1992) and prisons (Chatman, 1999) exemplify well small-world communities of this kind.

It is a major characteristic of small-world communities that social norms define the boundary of acceptable and unacceptable behavior; therefore, such norms are also constitutive of the socio-cultural barriers to information seeking. Chatman characterized the origins and features of socio-cultural barriers of this type in a series of ethnographic studies focusing on janitors (Chatman, 1991), elderly women in a retirement house (Chatman, 1992) and female prisoners (Chatman, 1999). These investigations showed that small-world related barriers draw on two main criteria stemming from community-specific norms. First, the criterion of situational relevance erects a barrier by drawing the borderline between the types of useful and useless sources of information. The latter should be avoided because they neither make sense to an individual nor are legitimized by other insiders sharing similar conditions of everyday life. Drawing on such judgments, the members of the small-world community shield themselves from certain information sources such as the outsiders of the community because they are not believed to respond to immediate concerns. Second, the criterion of avoidance of risk-taking is used to guard oneself against seeking information that would endanger one's position in the small-world community. For example, the revelation of one's poor health condition by asking for help from the insiders would contain the risk of being sent to a nursing home (Chatman, 1996, p. 200). Interestingly, Asla (2013, pp. 152-153) found evidence contrary to Chatman's conclusion in a study focusing on residents in two retirement communities. Because the residents often relied on their caregivers, family members, and close friends to serve as proxy information seekers, i.e., to seek information on their behalf, a number of the participants reported sharing with them what Chatman (1992, pp. 125-126) called "secret information," such as health or financial concerns.

Nevertheless, other studies have provided support for Chatman's findings about the impact of small-world related barriers to information seeking. In an investigation of information-seeking behavior among the members of a disadvantaged community, Hayter (2006, pp. 29-30) found that distrust of outsiders hampered access to human information sources. Since the social status of the inhabitants was low in the wider community, they were unwilling to leave their comfort zones to access information and help. An additional factor was related to the norm of risk-taking; fear of reprisals meant that people could not always state their help needs in crime situations, as they were worried about repercussions within the community. This suggests that small-world related barriers can effectively restrict information seeking about issues that could bring the risk of becoming expelled from the local community.

4.4. Institutional barriers

Information seeking can also be hampered by institutional barriers. In general, the term institution is commonly applied to customs and behavior patterns important to a society, as well as to particular formal and established organizations of the government and public services. Institutional barriers to information seeking come into existence when organizations such as

government offices and libraries consciously or unconsciously prevent individuals from obtaining the information that is needed. Institutional barriers can manifest themselves in excessive bureaucracy (for example, Dervin, 1976). In a study of information seeking among socially and economically disadvantaged people, Hayter (2006) found that bureaucratic complex language hampered information seeking from local authorities. Institutional barriers may also manifest in the form of authoritarian control (Houston & Westbrook, 2013). This refers to any situation in which individuals, agencies, or society at large deliberately or inadvertently restrict an individual's information seeking. Authoritarian control consists of diverse subtypes, for instance, censorship (including restrictive information systems) and bureaucratic inertia. Therefore, institutional barriers can slow down the information-seeking process remarkably and often restrict access to legal and financial information in particular. Harris and Dewdney (1994; see also Harris et al., 2001) examined the impact of institutional barriers on information seeking among abused women. The women's least helpful experiences were encounters with institutional service providers such as police officials whom they perceived to have a negative attitude toward them or who denied or minimized the severity of the abuse. Such responses may have a chilling effect on help-seeking efforts, exacerbating a woman's sense of isolation, and potentially exposing her to more risk.

Institutional barriers to information seeking can often be traced to the insufficient resources allocated to libraries and archives. The barriers manifest themselves in the unavailability of certain information resources such as printed books and the lack of access to databases. Liew and Ng (2006, p. 66) showed that the lack of relevant materials held in academic libraries was one of the most common barriers encountered by information seekers. Swigon (2011a, p. 483) found that 41% of the users of a Polish university library had faced barriers related to the lack of materials. Similar constraints were identified by Shenton (2008, pp. 281-283) in a study reviewing information seeking among high school students. A common barrier was that the material located in the library did not contain the desired content. Information seeking may also be rendered more difficult if information available in a public library is outdated or scattered (Pettigrew, Durrance, & Unruh, 2002, p. 898).

In addition to unavailability of relevant information resources, institutional barriers may manifest themselves in inadequate classification systems used in libraries and archives. Joseph (2010, pp. 37-39) identified such barriers among the users of electronic document and records management systems (EDMRS). One of the barriers was the lack of meaningful titling of documents or records registered into the EDRMS by colleagues or the Records Section. The negative impacts on information seeking included the waste of time and energy. Nineteen percent of the respondents reported their search was difficult because they eventually realized that the information they spent their time and effort searching for was never registered in the EDRMS in the first place. In the absence of registering these metadata, users' searches were incomplete, thus requiring more time and effort to search for the information using alternative metadata or search methods. Institutional barriers can affect negatively the effort to seek information from human sources, too. Researchers have identified two major consequences of these barriers: failure of access to an information source, and slow-down of the information-seeking process. For example, Harris and her associates (2001, pp. 126-132) found that abused women often failed to obtain help because police departments did not have interpreters to respond to calls from non-English-speaking people.

4.5. Organizational barriers

Socio-cultural barriers can be organization-specific as well. An organization may be generally understood as the planned, coordinated, and purposeful action of human beings working through collective action to reach a common goal or construct a tangible product. From this perspective, organizational barriers to information seeking primarily hamper the ways in which the employees work and communicate together. Different from institutional obstacles that erect barriers

between help seekers or clients and service providers, organizational barriers hamper information seeking among employees within individual organizations such as business enterprises, university departments, and government offices. Researchers have identified a host of organizational barriers appearing in the form of strong hierarchies, internal competition between work teams, lack of trust among colleagues, restricted access to information classified as confidential, and narrow specialization of tasks. The barriers can come into existence in many forms, for example, team-based cliques and not-invented-here syndrome (J. D. Johnson, 1996). On the other hand, most studies have approached barriers such as these from the viewpoint of information sharing rather than information seeking (Riege, 2005). Organizational barriers may appear, for instance, in the difficulty of getting access to information created by competing teams. In addition, employees may refrain from seeking additional information about the possible consequences of a risky decision in order to avoid conflict within a department or to save the face of the decision maker. Barriers can also appear between organizations in cases in which decision makers ignore or discount external sources of information because of the not-invented-here syndrome, that is, unwillingness to value the work of others (J. D. Johnson, 1996).

Since individual departments tend to give priority to their internal needs while organizing information resources, people coming from other departments of the same organization often encounter barriers hampering information seeking. This problem was identified in Kraaijenbrink's (2007) study of the gaps faced by engineers seeking for product information. They were often looking for particular components they could use in making a new product. In order to find such components, they needed categorizations based on component features, for example, size or capacity. However, suppliers of such components often categorized this information based on the departments that produced the components within the company. As this categorization was unrelated to the component features the engineer was interested in, it was very hard for the engineer to find the required information. Further support for the above findings was obtained from a study focusing on information seeking in a collaborative setting. Reddy and Spence (2008) found that unavailable information often resulted in the continuation of the information-seeking process from other sources, thus slowing down the work task performance. For example, team members had to ask additional questions within the organization to find the correct fact or to complement the existing information.

4.6. Barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital

Finally, socio-cultural barriers can appear at the level of an individual person due to the shortage of social and economic capital. Since economic resources are not distributed equally across the population, disadvantaged people are more likely to face economic barriers to information seeking. Although economic barriers could be examined as a separate category, for the sake of simplicity, they will be discussed under the umbrella concept of "lack of social and economic capital" because economy is not an area isolated from society and culture.

Traditionally, barriers of this kind are associated with socially and economically disadvantaged people labeled as "information poor" (Dervin, 1999, p. 744). Since the 1970s, researchers have identified a variety of attributes characteristic of such people. As summarized by Yu (2010,), the information poor tend to engage in a limited variety of information practices in local, confined social settings, which involve limited literacy, numeracy, information, and analytical skills. In the present study, the constraints traditionally associated with information poverty are approached in terms of barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital. Although constraints of this type often intersect with small-world related barriers, the former can be seen as a distinct category because barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital do not necessarily originate from the membership of a norm-bound community which dislikes communication with outsiders.

In general, social capital can be understood “as resources to which individuals have access through their social relationships” (C. A. Johnson, 2007, p. 884). From this perspective, poor contact networks restrict one’s opportunities to access useful information. According to Houston and Westbrook (2013, p. 1699), lack of social capital occurs when individuals cannot obtain information from another person because of an apparent disparity in social or economic status (SES). This disparity manifests as behavior ranging from shyness to mistrust to fear by the person of inferior SES and behavior ranging from ignoring to condescending to overt attacking by the person of superior SES. C. A. Johnson (2007) demonstrated empirically that the lack of social capital limited the range of information sources available to information seekers, thus relegating them to using sources that were not likely to result in positive outcomes. The empirical study of the information practices among informationally poor people in China provided further support for these findings (Yu, 2010).

Lack of economic capital can appear in the stringency of household budgets making it impossible for an individual to buy computing equipment or pay for access to networked sources (e.g., Chowdhury & Gibb, 2009; Yu, 2010). Since the 1990s, barriers due to the lack of economic capital have often been discussed in terms of the digital divide, suggesting that unequal access to the Internet erects a barrier to digital information (Salinas, 2008). Williamson, Schauder, and Bow (2000) forecasted that lack of access to the Internet due to lack of income could have social consequences for particular groups of people such as sight impaired citizens. As the Internet has become integral to the way in which people access information, those who cannot afford Internet connections will be doubly disadvantaged. Despite the growing number of people using the Internet for information seeking, there continue to be socio-economic gaps in use of networked information between majority and minority populations, such as lower income African Americans (Warren et al., 2010). Even though people not owning computers may access the Internet in public libraries free of charge, information seeking can be hampered by long wait times and restrictions on maximum time allotted to computer use per person (Connolly & Crosby, 2014). Houston and Westbrook (2013, p. 1697) showed that when abused individuals lack economic resources such as money or bank cards, they cannot buy relief from intimate partner violence in the form of, for example, bus fares or assistance in escape. Lack of economic capital can keep an abused person from visiting a friend or the public library or accessing the Internet, any of which could provide information about escaping abuse. The above examples suggest that economic barriers combined with physical disabilities or spatial barriers can be particularly compelling because they effectively block access to sources of information.

5. Discussion

Based on conceptual analysis, the present study elaborated the picture of the origin, features, and impact of socio-cultural barriers to information seeking. The main contribution of the analysis is the typology of barriers presented in Table 1.

Barrier types	Main features of barriers	Impact on information seeking
Barriers due to language problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - insufficient language proficiency - dependence on gatekeepers 	<i>Common to all barrier types:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hindering information seeking - restricting information seeking - delaying information seeking - negative affective reactions such as frustration
Barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - being classified as a member of a stigmatized group of people - prohibitions related to cultural taboo 	
Small-world related barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - distrust of outsiders as information sources - avoidance of risk-taking 	<i>Specific to individual barrier types:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concealing attempts to seek information due to social stigma or cultural taboo - refraining from seeking information from certain types of sources such as outsiders - fear for being judged inferior or incompetent in work community - fear for being judged socially deviant from others, or outsider, or becoming expelled from a small-world community - helping to avoid conflicts within an organization or community - circumventing barriers by finding alternative sources - making use of proxy information seekers in small-world communities
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - authoritarian control - excessive bureaucracy - insufficient staff resources - poor organization of information resources 	
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strong hierarchies within organizations - internal competition between work teams - lack of trust - the existence of cliques - not-invented-here syndrome 	
Barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor contact networks - insufficient economic resources 	

Table 1. The typology of socio-cultural barriers to information seeking.

Research question 1 dealt with the features of socio-cultural barriers. As suggested by Table 1, the barriers are constituted by multiple features. Common to the features is that they are man-made constructs coming into existence when an individual crosses the border between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, or puts in question the customary rules that govern behavior in groups, communities, and societies. Barriers of diverse types incorporate individual features. Barriers due to language problems manifest themselves in insufficient language proficiency in English among immigrants, for example, while barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo appear in strong prohibitions relating to an area of human activity or custom that is sacred or forbidden based on moral judgment and religious beliefs. The features of small-world related barriers include distrust of outsiders as information sources and avoidance in risk taking. Main features of institutional barriers entail authoritarian control and excessive bureaucracy, insufficient staff resources, and poor organization of information resources. Researchers have identified a host of features that are characteristic of organizational barriers. Information seeking can be hampered by strong hierarchies, the existence of cliques, and lack of trust, for example. Finally, barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital are typically characterized by poor contact networks and insufficient economic resources.

Research question 2 focuses on the impact of socio-cultural barriers. Unsurprisingly, researchers have approached socio-cultural barriers as factors that mainly have a negative impact. As Table 1 suggests, they hinder, delay, or prevent access to information, independent of barrier types. However, research has identified a few qualities specific to the impact of socio-cultural

barriers. First, concealing attempts to seek information is a particular characteristic of barriers related to social stigma and cultural taboo, as exemplified by the studies focusing on sexual minorities. Second, refraining from seeking information from certain types of sources such as outsiders is a particular characteristic of the impact of small-world related barriers. In both cases, the explanation can be found in the existence of restrictive social norms defining certain ways of acting. Yi et al. (2012) is included in the list of references as unacceptable. Third, there can be positive impact based on the fact that barriers prohibiting information seeking within organizations can help to avoid open conflicts. Attempts to circumvent socio-cultural barriers may also result in the finding of novel sources of information, thus broadening the person's information source horizon. For example, the facing of an institutional barrier may encourage the individual to seek alternative information sources available on the Internet and thus avoid queues at office hours. Among disabled or aged people, proxy information seekers such as caregivers and family members can enable access to information sources that otherwise would remain unused.

Quite unsurprisingly, the findings indicate that socio-cultural barriers primarily give rise to negative affective reactions across barrier types. Frustration appeared to be the most frequent emotion. It may result in the facing of institutional barriers or barriers due to language problems, for example. Specific to socio-cultural barriers, emotions such as fear of being judged incompetent in the eyes of colleagues and fear of being expelled from a small-world community were identified as forms of impact on information seeking.

The evaluation of the novelty value of the research findings is rendered difficult because there are no comparable studies. However, the findings support Dervin's (1999) view emphasizing that barriers to information seeking should be defined by actors in situated moments and not be assumed to be of any particular kind, but rather of multiple kinds. The repertoire of the types of socio-cultural barriers indicates that constraints faced by information seekers can vary considerably. Furthermore, barriers are encountered in specific situations such as medical encounters, and there may be combinations of diverse barriers, for example, barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital and small-world related barriers. As the provision of and access to alternative information sources has remarkably improved thanks to the Internet, the socio-cultural barriers may be less fatal than in the past. For example, barriers originating from social stigma due to HIV status can be circumvented—at least partially—by consulting web pages (Veinot, 2009). An empirical study conducted by Hasler, Ruthven, and Buchanan (2014) demonstrated that Internet discussion forums provide an outlet for those suffering from information poverty to express their information needs and associated concerns. Topics relevant to such information seeking tend to be sensitive or intimate, entailing, for example, mental health and sexuality that still carry stigma in various social contexts.

These observations support the view that the context-specific nature of socio-cultural barriers has changed in the Internet era. For example, small-world related barriers depicted by Chatman (1991, 1992, 1999) are strongly associated with the pre-Internet information world. Drawing on the ideas of Wellman (2006), we may argue that community has moved from hierarchically arranged, densely knit, and normatively bounded “little-boxes” characterized by Chatman to social networks. In networked societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are both flatter and more complexly structured. From this perspective, many of the features of small-world related barriers may appear as outmoded (Asla & Williamson, 2015; Savolainen, 2009). However, the barriers characteristic of small-world communities may still be relevant in the study of local communities such as firmly established cliques at work places, as well as fairly closed communities like prisons.

6. Conclusion

Barriers to information seeking are significant contextual factors because they determine the extent to which people can access sources of information. Socio-cultural barriers have many faces. The study revealed multiple features of such obstacles and identified their impacts on information seeking. In addition to classic barrier types such as institutional and organizational constraints, the present study enriched the repertoire of socio-cultural barriers by characterizing small-world related barriers, as well as barriers due to the lack of social and economic capital, for example.

As the present study focused on socio-cultural barriers, the picture of factors constraining information seeking should be complemented by comparative investigations reviewing the features and impact of barriers of other types. This research topic is important because in practice, the barriers to information seeking are inextricably intertwined. For example, barriers related to lack of social capital can be accompanied by cognitive barriers such as unawareness of relevant human sources and affective constraints like fear of incompetence while seeking information from outsiders. The overall picture of socio-cultural barriers can also be refined by comparing factors hampering information seeking and information sharing (e.g., Riege, 2005). Comparative studies of this kind are important because they also serve the ends of refining typologies of barriers to information behavior and validating them empirically. Such studies also have practical implications for the development of library and information services. If we can specify the extent to which and ways in which barriers hinder, delay, or prevent access to information, the negative impact can be reduced—at least partially—by offering alternative routes to information. The development of networked services is particularly important in this regard because they make it possible to circumvent many barriers that traditionally have hampered information seeking.

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